

Proposed state budget cuts jeopardize Whatcom County court services

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By CHARLES SNYDER AND JIM BRITAIN — COURTESY TO THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Several years ago, judges statewide began urging the Legislature for more stable funding for the trial courts so that we could provide equal and accessible justice across our state. At that time, our great state of Washington was dead last – 50th out of 50 states – for the money the state spent on our trial courts. Even worse, the money the state spent on the entire judicial branch of government was only three-tenths of 1 percent of the state operating budget.

Beginning in 2005, the Legislature deserves much credit for responsibly starting down the path to provide adequate and stable funding for the trial courts of our state. The state's contribution to the trial courts rose from three-tenths to seven-tenths of the state operating budget. Even with that increase Washington was still 50th out of 50 states in its funding for trial courts – the courts that ordinary citizens rely on daily to handle felony criminal cases, dissolutions of marriage, disputes involving real property, businesses and personal injury. Beginning in 2010, however, this critical funding has again been cut.

The 2013 cuts proposed by the Legislature to these programs are even more devastating. For example, the Senate's budget proposes a cut of \$7.9 million that would cut funds that are passed through from the state to courts throughout the state. This proposed Senate budget will result in a cumulative cut of 31.2 percent the judicial branch of government over the past few years.

That is greater than any agency of the executive branch has taken.

These cuts will mean the counties will again have to pay the costs of interpreters for people in court who do not speak English, a growing number of people. It also means that programs such as Court Appointed Special Advocates, known as CASA, will be cut or end. CASA volunteers provide legally required guardians ad litem who represent children who are abused or neglected and placed in foster care. In Whatcom County the CASA program saves the county government about \$100,000 per year. If this funding goes away, the county will again have to pay for contracted guardians ad litem. Other funding in danger provides money for a contribution to the salaries of district and qualifying municipal court judges whose salaries would otherwise be paid fully by county government and would affect collection of fines and other assessments by the clerks – which adds money to the general fund – among other funding that serves those using the trial courts. And finally, after nearly two years of work on a businesslike approach to find a replacement for the failing and obsolete 1970s era computerized case management program for superior courts, on the eve of purchasing such a system, the Senate budget takes all the money saved over the years for that purpose and uses it for other things.

It is reprehensible that a co-equal branch of government, the judiciary, is provided so little money to run our statewide court system and is now being threatened with even more cuts. These cuts just do not make sense.

As of the time of this writing the House has passed a more responsible budget that would include funding for most of the court operations that were cut in the Senate budget. It is important that members of both the House and Senate understand the importance of these items and include them in any final budget passed. As citizens who depend on our courts, please contact your legislators and tell them how important this is. Don't close the doors to the courthouse for those persons who need justice.

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